

Documents on Diplomacy: Resources

Briefing Memo III: Diplomacy during the Early Republic

The conduct of foreign policy was an important part of the debate over a new Constitution. In September 1789, Congress established a Department of Foreign Affairs, the first Cabinet department of the new Federal Government. It came not a moment too soon. In the years that followed, widely divergent reaction to the wartime maneuvering of England and France would come to color all aspects of American politics. Diplomats would be in the front lines.

Bloody Revolution

Just 10 weeks after the inauguration of George Washington, the French Revolution began in Europe. At first Americans were pleased to see another nation turn to democracy and wanted to aid the revolutionaries. But doubts grew in 1793 when the struggle became bloodier and France's new ambassador, "Citizen" Genet, openly rallied popular support and tried to meddle in American politics. The execution of Louis XVI in January 1794 solidified the opposition of the Federalists, who feared instability at home and the loss of British trade overseas.

Washington's goal was to keep the United States out of war but for the first time, Americans weren't sure that his decision was correct. To ease tensions with England, Washington sent John Jay to negotiate a treaty. Although members of Congress were shocked and the treaty was highly unpopular, Washington decided to ratify it.

Ironically, Jay's Treaty brought Americans unanticipated benefits. Peace between England and the United States made Spain's lightly guarded New World territory vulnerable to attack because of Spain's support for France. The Spanish needed a deal with the Americans. So after 12 years of stonewalling, Spain agreed that Americans could freely travel the Mississippi River and deposit goods at New Orleans. The treaty was wildly popular with Americans. As Washington's presidency ended, the United States had used diplomacy to

improve its international position dramatically. Washington urged Americans to steer a similar prudent course in the future.

Secrets and Bribes

But as long as the European war continued, American sympathies remained divided between the British and the French and vulnerable to penalties from either side. To avoid war with France, President John Adams sent three representatives, known in secret dispatches as "X, Y, and Z," to Paris in 1797. The Americans were outraged to learn that the French expected a large bribe before doing business. Adams released the secret information to Congress, which suspended trade with France and voided the 1778 treaties.

Adams' Federalist supporters were hostile to France—and to any American who might be sympathetic to the French cause—and believed that strict measures were needed to preserve the federal government. One American, George Logan, was so worried about war that he traveled to France to carry out his own negotiations; a practice that Congress promptly banned.

Adams' successor, Thomas Jefferson, found the intersection of domestic and international politics to be equally problematic—especially after Spain returned the Louisiana Territory to France in 1802. Americans believed that the French wanted to re-establish their empire in North America and close the Mississippi to American trade. Federalists wanted war, but Jefferson's supporters allowed him to try negotiation instead.

In 1803, Jefferson sent James Monroe to assist the American Minister in Paris, Robert Livingston, in negotiations for West Florida and New Orleans. But France's failure to re-establish control over the Caribbean island of Santo Domingo ended Napoleon's Louisiana plans. He decided to offer the Americans the entire territory instead. Monroe and Livingston took the deal despite its unknown

boundaries and dodgy legality, and Jefferson convinced Congress to ratify it. After last minute tensions, the Louisiana Territory was transferred to the United States in January 1804.

Blunders and Lies

President Jefferson tried unsuccessfully to keep both the British and the French from preying on American ships and commerce and his successor, James Madison, inherited the conflict. Madison, too, relied on negotiation, but tough British positions, duplicitous French “promises”, and diplomatic blunders fed war fever. Even though Americans were deeply divided, Congress declared war in July 1812.

Peace negotiations began almost immediately and Americans were shocked by England’s harsh demands. But the capture of Napoleon in April 1814—and several timely American victories at the end of the year—moved both sides to conclude a peace treaty. The treaty only restored the status quo but did include a provision for arbitration panels to settle future boundary disputes on the northern boundary of the United States.

Events during the period of the Early Republic provided several important precedents that would guide American diplomatic activity in the future: the policy of non-intervention in European affairs and the practice of acquiring territory by negotiation. ■